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IMPROVING READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE FRESHMEN.

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A 3-YEAR EXPERIMENT IN IMPROVING THE READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE FRESHMEN WAS CONDUCTED IN ORDER TO DETERMINE (1) WHETHER OR NOT SPECIALLY SELECTED MATERIALS, EXPERIENCES, AND METHODOLOGY CAN MOTIVATE STUDENTS MORE THOROUGHLY THAN DOES THE TYPICAL FRESHMAN ENGLISH COURSE, AND (2) WHETHER THE EFFECTIVELY MOTIVATED STUDENTS WHO HAVE IMPROVED THEIR READING AND WRITING SKILLS WILL LIKEWISE ACHIEVE AT A HIGHER LEVEL IN OTHER ACADEMIC SUBJECTS INVOLVING THESE SKILLS. THIS DOCUMENT IS A BRIEF SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE STUDY CONDUCTED. THE PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY, MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE METHODOLOGY, AND EVALUATION TECHNIQUES ARE OUTLINED BRIEFLY. (THE FULL REPORT IS AVAILABLE AS "THE READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE FRESHMEN," SEPTEMBER 1967, OEC-5-10-021, BR-5-0762.) THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION," VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2, MAY 1967, PAGES 99-105. (BN)

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Improving Reading and Writing Skills of Disadvantaged College Freshmen

NICK AARON FORD

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IN THE SPRING OF 1964 my colleague, Professor Waters Turpin, and I were notified by the U.S. Commissioner of Education that we had been awarded a research grant of $49,842 to conduct a three-year experiment in improving the reading and writing skills of culturally disadvantaged college freshmen. Our application for the grant contained the following introductory statement:

> The problem to be attacked is the lack of success in developing satisfactory reading and writing skills by the majority of college freshmen from poor cultural backgrounds. It is important and significant to the field of education for three major reasons:
>
> (1) At present more than one-third of the students in the public schools of America's fifteen largest cities are products of and continue to live in poor cultural environments. It is reliably reported that by 1970 more than 50 percent of the pupils in the public schools of the fifteen largest cities will come from culturally disadvantaged backgrounds.
> (2) Although many of these culturally disadvantaged students are graduated from high school and manage to enter college, they are dropped for poor scholarship largely because they do not develop sufficient skills in reading and writing to master academic subjects required for graduation. This unfortunate situation results in a great loss of potentially skilled manpower from active participation in the American economy. In addition, it adds unnecessarily a large body of frustrated citizens to the urban centers.
> (3) Most of the culturally disadvantaged students who, because of unusual talent or industry, are finally graduated from college are denied the opportunity to pursue graduate or professional studies because they cannot satisfactorily pass Graduate Record Examinations or other professional tests which are heavily weighted with cultural items. These students, though talented, remain culturally disadvantaged because they have never developed the skill to read with ease and pleasure, nor to express themselves effectively in speech or writing.

We stated the two major objectives of our proposed project in the following manner: (1) to determine whether or not specially selected reading materials and experiences and specially devised methodology can motivate culturally disadvantaged students to improve their reading and writing skills more readily and thoroughly than the normal experiences of a typical Freshman English course; and (2) to determine whether or not culturally disadvantaged students who have improved their reading and writing skills because of effective motivation in the Freshman English course will likewise achieve at a higher level in other academic subjects involving these skills.

The Educational Policies Commission has identified the five main streams of the culturally disadvantaged as Negroes

from the rural South, "Hill Whites" from the Appalachian upland, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and Reservation Indians. The students involved in this experiment were selected from the predominantly Negro student body of Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland, who received their secondary education in the schools of the Middle Atlantic region of the upper South; the majority were natives of Maryland, largely of urban origin.

We started the project July 1, 1964, by devoting the first two months to selecting, editing, and mimeographing text materials. At the beginning of the fall semester in September, we created two experimental sections of Freshman English consisting of twenty-five students each, randomly selected from a segment of the incoming freshman class whose scores on the various entrance tests confirmed their eligibility for possible selection. Each student in the experimental sections was matched with a student from the remaining segment of eligibles (approximately 400 from a class of 1,000). The criteria used for matching were scores on two standardized English tests (A.C.T. and Cooperative English Expression), a standardized reading test (Cooperative Reading Comprehension), an over-all aptitude test (A. C. T. Composite), and a personality-type test (Edwards Personal Preference Schedule) to obtain information on non-intellective factors which possibly affect the development of reading and writing skills. The fifty matching students, who were designated as the control group, were randomly scattered among a dozen sections of Freshmen English taught by eight different teachers.

Methodology. The next day after a news release on our large research grant was carried by the local newspapers, my colleague and I were visited by the branch manager from one of the largest audio-visual manufacturing companies in the nation. He informed us that he had just read the news about our research project concerned with seeking methods to improve the reading and writing skills of disadvantaged college freshmen and that he had the answer to all of our problems. His answer was a new machine his company had developed which would cost less than a thousand dollars. If we bought his machine, he joyfully confided, we would accomplish our purpose and still have $49,000 left to use to our own advantage. We told him, of course, that no machine could achieve the goals we had in mind, for our philosophy is that the development of reading and writing skills is a matter of motivation rather than mechanical stimulation, and that we would not be interested in using a machine even if it were a free gift. Naturally, he was bitterly disappointed and focused upon us such a look of nightmarish disbelief that he stumbled over two chairs before he could realize that he was not in a world of fantasy.

My colleague, Professor Turpin, and I believe that the development of skills in reading and writing is primarily a psychological process and that once a reader has been sufficiently motivated to *want to read* articles and books because they reveal information and points of view that are interesting, challenging, and significant *to him*, there are few, if any, barriers strong enough to prevent his mastery of the art of reading. This truth is also applicable to the art of writing. Our major task, therefore, as we envisioned it, was to select, organize, and present a collection of readings in such a way as to stimulate the kind of interest necessary to motivate culturally disadvantaged students to *want* to read and write.

It is our belief that these freshmen who now are so woefully deficient in reading and writing skills were never motivated in elementary and high school *to want* to read and write because reading and writing were never made rele-

vant to their poverty-stricken, slum-ridden lives. In the *Saturday Review*, September 11, 1965, Nancy Larrick, former president of the International Reading Association, begins an article entitled "The All-White World of Children's Books" with the question "Why are they always *white* children?" raised by a five-year-old Negro girl, who was looking at a picture book at the Manhattanville Nursery School in New York. Miss Larrick comments, "With a child's uncanny wisdom, she singled out one of the most critical issues in American education today: the almost complete omission of Negroes from books for children. . . . Yet in Cleveland, 53 per cent of the children in kindergarten through high school are Negro. In St. Louis, the figure is 56.9 per cent. In the District of Columbia, 70 per cent are Negro. Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them."

We approached our task with two major objectives in so far as methodology is concerned: (1) to compile a collection of readings that would be concerned with the personal needs, drives, and interests of the culturally disadvantaged; and (2) to devise ways of presenting these readings that would encourage the students to want to talk about and write about their reactions, and to want their responses to be in standard English. We began the first year with a mimeographed anthology of approximately 500 pages, organized around the following themes:

Unit I: Understanding the Nature and Uses of Language
Unit II: Understanding One's Self
Unit III: Understanding Limitations and Opportunities of Minorities in the United States
Unit IV: Understanding Global Problems
Unit V: Understanding Race and Democracy: Exploring Philosophic Perspectives

It was our intention to capture the student's interest by first focusing on readings that were pertinent to his personal problems and situations and gradually, step by step, to widen his horizon from the personal to the community, from the community to the nation, and from the nation to the world. As teachers, we felt it was our responsibility to help the student to see how his personal problems and situation were similar to those of other groups in the community, in the nation, and in the world. We felt that if we could, by our method of presentation, help the student to identify with the various races and nationalities of man, we would be motivating him to want to learn about, think about, talk about, and write about ideas and experiences that had meaning for him. For instance, here are the titles of some of the readings in the unit on Understanding Limitations and Opportunities of Minorities in the United States:

"Why We Can't Wait" by Martin Luther King
"Black Muslims: Asset or Liability to Negro Protest" by Phyllis Barber
"Thurgood Marshall: Counselor at Law" by Saunders Redding
"Everybody Knows His Name (James Baldwin)" by Marvin Elkhoff
"Ivy League Negro" by William Melvin Kelley
"The Puerto Ricans" by Nathan Glazer
"Let the Indian Be the Hero" by Stanley Walker
"Types of Anti-Catholicism" by Robert McAfee Brown
"On Being Irish in America" by Charles Keenan
"What is a Jew?" by Morris Adler

Each article was followed by questions

for study and discussion, including tests for comprehension, opportunity for examining rhetorical effectiveness, vocabulary study, and writing assignments. In other words, reading, discussion, and writing in this experiment are the heart of the learning experience, while grammar and English usage are important in making these experiences more understandable and meaningful.

Assumptions. Three major assumptions underlay our methodology:

Assumption No. 1. We assume that disadvantaged students do not learn to read and write effectively because the learning experiences generally furnished by the school are irrelevant to much of contemporary life. One simple example of this irrelevance, other than the failure of textbooks to be concerned with the lives and problems of minorities, can be seen in a recent experience I had in visiting a slum high school English class in a large city, taught by a teacher who had been highly praised as the best in the all-Negro school. The major objective of the lesson was to develop effective expression by having students view or recall a familiar sight or sensory experience and describe in vivid language their reactions to it. The teacher had spent much time in preparing the lesson by clipping from magazines interesting advertisements calculated to stimulate student reaction. The first clipping exhibited was a colorful advertisement of a beautiful girl luxuriating in a spectacular circular bathtub of sparkling baby blue suds in an elegant bathroom of ceramic tile furnished with every kind of luxury imaginable. Pointing to this picture, the teacher asked for volunteers to describe the feelings of the girl in the bathtub. When no hands were raised the teacher was disgusted with the lack of response and told me afterwards that she found it almost impossible to motivate her students to express themselves. Evidently she did not realize that none of her students had ever been exposed to luxury of any kind, that some had never seen a bathroom, and that many had no bathrooms or even private toilet facilities in their homes.

Assumption No. 2. We assume that the American school and college are obligated to teach all native students *standard English* as the acceptable means of communication. We mean by *standard English* the dialect generally admitted by the majority of speakers to be superior to all the other dialects in the language. Since standard English is the system of communication used in "carrying on the affairs" of the American society, it is necessary for the schools to insist on its mastery by its native students, if the schools accept the responsibility of helping to prepare all students to participate on an equal basis in the affairs of the nation. This assumption rejects the practice that is becoming popular in some important centers of instruction to teach standard English as a second language to the culturally disadvantaged. For to promote this "second language" theory is to forge a new chain of segregation and discrimination which national civil rights laws are intended to destroy.

Assumption No. 3. We assume that culturally disadvantaged students not only *can* learn to master standard English as a primary language but that the majority of them *want* to do so. We deny the doctrine of Dr. Frank Riessman, Professor of Educational Sociology at New York University, who says in an article in the *Saturday Review*, September 17, 1966:

> The key ground rule of the Dialect Game—for both teacher and teaching situation—is acceptance of the students' nonstandard primary language. The instructor who makes clear to his pupils that their primary language is not something to be denied or suppressed, but is

> in fact a linguistic entree to that other language which, in more formal circumstances, can produce more effective results, is building firmly on positive grounds.

We believe a teacher who is guided by this doctrine will not be building on positive grounds, but rather on sinking sand, on the sand of condescension and denial of the ability of the disadvantaged stuent to master the predominant dialect of his native land, a dialect that he and more than fifteen generations of his forefathers have intimately lived with from birth. It is the duty of the teacher to demand that disadvantaged students discard their substandard dialect as the first step in the process of discarding the ghetto and second class citizenship. To say that the Negro child believes the teacher who rejects his substandard dialect rejects him is nonsense, for the average Negro child, who certainly knows the meaning of picket lines and civil rights demonstrations, knows that his substandard dialect is a part of the substandard living conditions that he and his parents are trying so desperately to escape. In fact, he is more likely to believe that those who are satisfied to have him think of standard English as a second language may be expressing a subconscious satisfaction at having him remain a second class citizen in a land where the users of standard English dispense the rewards of job opportunities and social approval.

Two years ago Professor Turpin and I prepared a questionnaire on this subject and requested 1,000 freshmen, 98% Negro, from more than 25 states to fill in the answers with a check mark without signing their names. The results were as follows: To the question: "Should high school English teachers discourage non-standard language usage by minority group students whose families and neighbors continually use such patterns?" 73% said yes. To the question: "Do the parents of minority group students approve their children's use of standard English?" 82% said yes. To the question: "Do associates of minority group students discourage the students' use of standard English?" 73% said no. To the question: "Do minority group students resent teachers who reject their dialect?" 59% said no.

Evaluation. Unfortunately, English teachers are seldom knowledgeable about the intricacies of objective testing. Consequently, we included an expert in tests and measurement as the third member of our team. Dr. Otis D. Froe, Director of Research and Evaluation at our college, is officially designated as statistician for our project and is concerned only with the objective evaluation of our efforts. I shall not attempt to reproduce for you the seven tables, bristling with technical terminology, which he used in his report on our first year's progress; I shall be content to quote those pertinent parts in which he summarizes his findings in a language suitable for laymen.

He explains that January and May post-testings were administered to both the experimental and control groups after one and two semesters of instruction. Since the two groups were comparable in the beginning, success of the special treatment was measured in terms of the size of the gain made by each group after "experimental" and "control" instruction. In the analysis of the results, the part scores were considered as well as the total score.

In terms of the skills involved in "effectiveness of written expression," both groups made mean gains (statistically significant at the .05 level) after the first semester of instruction. Neither group made significant mean gains from the second testing (beginning of the second semester) to the third testing (end of the second semester). On the "Mechanics of Expression" part of the test, the experimental group made statistically signifi-

cant gains (.01 level) after the first semester of special treatment. The control group made no significant gain in this area after one (the first) semester of instruction. This is indicated by a critical ratio of 1.35. After the second semester of instruction, the experimental group still made further statistically significant gains (.01 level of confidence), while for the control group the gain made was not significant in terms of a .01 level of confidence. The gain for this latter group was significant at a little better than the .05 level of confidence. When the total test is considered, the data indicate that the experimental group made gains in communication skills, for both periods of instruction (first and second semesters), which are significant at the .01 level of confidence. For the control group, there has been no significant gain (total test) for either period. Only for the first period of instruction was the gain significant at better than the .05 level. If we look at the results in another way, it can be said that the experimental group has a mean gain that is twice that of the control group. The critical ratio of the difference in mean gains for the two groups is significant at the .01 level of confidence. Also, of importance is the fact that from the pre-test to the post-test in English at the end of the first semester a number of cases were noted in which there was a decrease in raw score. Among the control group, there were twice as many cases of this type as among the experimental group. The number of cases of a decrease in raw score for these two groups was 15 (28.8 percent) for the control group and only 7 (13.4 percent) for the experimental group.

The three aspects of reading achievement measured by this test are vocabulary, level of comprehension, and speed of comprehension. When the total groups are considered (experimental and control), it is seen that the experimental has made gains significant at the .05 level of confidence in the areas of "level of comprehension," and "speed of comprehension." The gain for the experimental groups on the vocabulary section of the test is not significant. The control group has not made statistically significant gains (either at the .01 or .05 levels of confidence) in either area of the reading test. In summary, although no phenomenal gains were made by either group on the reading test, the gains made by the experimental group in the areas of comprehension and speed seem to surpass those of the control group in these same two areas. The nature of this test is, perhaps, such that phenomenal gains in vocabulary and level of comprehension skills cannot be expected among culturally deprived students after only two semesters of special treatment. Then, too, the experiences provided in this special treatment were not aimed directly at these particular skills. The emphasis seemed to be concerned with a change in reading and writing interests of students. Tests aimed at this non-intellective-type behavior will be administered at the end of the sophomore year for those participants who are still enrolled in the college.

Other criteria considered in assessing the effectiveness of the special treatment provided the experimental group were grades assigned in the Reading and Writing courses (English 101 and English 102), and the disposition of those cases where the student did not complete the course or received a grade indicating unsatisfactory completion of the course during the first attempt. It was decided to use grades as a criterion since the bases for assigning grades in the Department of English have been more objectively formulated than is the case with many other academic departments in the college. Objective-type "keys" have been prepared which teachers use in evaluating themes and other work done by the student. When the total experimental and control groups

are considered, it seems that overall the experimental group has received a more favorable pattern of teacher ratings (grades) than the control group. This is true both in English 101 and 102. For example, over 34 percent of the experimental group has received the grade of "B" in English 101. Only 15 percent of the control group received this grade. While the percentage of students receiving the grade of "C" in English 101 was the same for both groups, twenty-one percent of the control group received some type of "W" (withdrawal) grade in English 101, as against 4 percent of the experimental group. In English 102, the percent receiving the grade of "U" among the control group is twice that of the experimental group.

In summary, the data collected seem to indicate that the special treatment given to the experimental group, in the way of specially selected reading materials and experiences and specially devised methodology, has promise of motivating culturally disadvantaged students to improve their reading and writing skills to a greater extent than the typical kind of experiences found in similar Freshman English courses.

In conclusion, I must say that my colleague and I do not yet know whether or not the final evaluation of our experiment, due to be completed at the end of the summer, 1967, will be favorable. If in the end it is judged to be a success, we will be the first to admit that it is not *the* answer to the problem, but only *one* answer. Regardless of the result of this effort, we have pledged to ourselves never to be satisfied with *one* new insight or *one* new answer, but to continue in the spirit of Tennyson's Ulysses: "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

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